

Building the Pentathlete Mind
Army Leadership in the Contemporary Operating Environment

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A Pentathlete is a **STRONG** multi-skilled leader that first and foremost is a strategic and creative thinker. A builder of leaders and teams. An individual that must be a competent full-spectrum warfighter, or an accomplished professional supporting that warfighter.

Dr. Francis J. Harvey
Secretary of the Army
2006 AUSA Convention Opening Remarks

Since 2004, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Peter Schoomaker, has made frequent reference to the concept of the “pentathlete leader”. He first used the term during a National Journal interview in response to a question by James Kitfield comparing the Army to a “high-tech sprinter...bogged down in a counterinsurgency marathon.” GEN Schoomaker expounded upon the Track and Field analogy, and discussed a move away from singly focused individuals and units towards a “pentathlete or decathlete model.”¹ Since that time the concept has rapidly gained momentum, appearing most recently in both Secretary Harvey’s and the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army’s addresses during last year’s Association of the United States Army Convention. Additionally, the concept of the “pentathlete leader” has been incorporated into formal Army leadership instruction at all levels, from the Primary Leadership Development Course to the Army War College. The term has come to encapsulate leadership for the Army of the 21st Century.

Unfortunately, the picture of the pentathlete leader has not been adequately painted. Too often the fundamental characteristics of this modern leader are misguidedly linked to individual skills and unit missions. The CSA’s vision of warrior leaders, equipped with the problem-solving capabilities and confidence to respond to any situation on the battlefield, has been reduced to a caricature, represented by a laundry-list of combat skills identified with current

¹ James Kitfield. “Army chief struggles to transform service during war”. *National Journal*, 29 October 2004. Online. Available from Internet, <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/1004/102904nj1.htm>, accessed 15 February 2007.

operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This does not mean that competence is not an essential component of modern leadership. Quite the contrary, today's leaders at all levels must become proficient in an increasingly large and diverse set of missions and tasks in order to operate effectively in the current fight. However, mastery of these skills is not enough; the sum of the parts does not equal the whole. If the concept of the "pentathlete leader" is to be ingrained in our future leaders and inculcated into Army Leadership doctrine, then it must be defined in more fundamental terms. The molding of pentathlete leaders must begin with the mind. Doing this requires a basic understanding of what it means to be a pentathlete.

Historical Perspective

The ancient pentathlon was introduced to the Greek Games at the 18th Olympiad in 708 B.C. The Olympic Games themselves had been established to pay homage to the gods and to pit the best warriors of the age against each other in feats of military skill. The games had always maintained strong ties with the Greek military heritage. All wars and conflicts were suspended every four years for the conduct of the games, and the competitors represented the military elite of each of the Greek city-states. The early events, the stadion (180 meter to 240 meter foot race), boxing, wrestling, pankration (full-contact fighting), and chariot racing, were all considered relevant combat skills and were derived from pre-existing military training. When the pentathlon was introduced with its five combat events, stadion, discus, javelin, the long jump, and wrestling, it was considered the ultimate test of military training and ability.²

Capturing the pentathlon plate was not simply a matter of physical prowess. Mastering each of the respective skills required both mental and physical agility. Endurance was also a key factor due to the short duration of the competition. All five events were conducted over the

² Dave Scheiber, "Ancient Games: Pentathlon," *St. Petersburg Times*, 8 August 2004. Online. Available from Internet, <http://www.sptimes.com/2004/08/08/Olympics/Pentathlon.shtml>, accessed 15 February 2007.

course of one day, and the champion needed to win three of the events, one of which had to be wrestling. Much academic debate in the field of Classics exists as to the sequence of the events, but most scholars agree that the number of competitors was reduced as events were completed, based on performance, and that the last event was the wrestling competition. According to myth, the pentathlon was invented by Jason to compete against his friend and contemporary Peleus, father of Achilles, who was the first champion. Aristotle considered the pentathlon to be the ultimate in athletic competition, stating that the “most perfect sportsmen, therefore, are the pentathletes because in their bodies strength and speed are combined in beautiful harmony.”³ The Greek pentathlon was only contested three times in the modern era, in 1912, 1920, and 1924. Although the Greek pentathlon was eliminated from Olympic competition, the military spirit of the contest was transferred to a new event, the modern pentathlon.

The founder of the modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, convinced the Olympic Committee to introduce the sport of modern pentathlon to the world at the 1912 Games in Stockholm, Sweden. Coubertin conceived of combining five disparate events, show-jumping, shooting, fencing, swimming, and cross-country running, based on the image of a military liaison officer departing from enemy territory to deliver a message. After negotiating rugged terrain, his horse is brought down and, he must then defend himself with pistol and sword, swim across a raging river, and finally deliver his message on foot. Coubertin envisioned the modern pentathlon becoming the ultimate representation of the Olympics, describing the event as above all others because it “tested an athlete's moral qualities as much as their physical resources and skills, producing thereby the ideal, complete athlete.”⁴

³ Oxford University Modern Pentathlon Association, “The History of the Ancient Pentathlon”, available from <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oumpa/ancient.shtml>; Online; accessed 16 February 2007.

⁴ Modern-Pentathlon.Com, “Modern Pentathlon History”, available from <http://www.modern-pentathlon.com/history.html>; Online; accessed 16 February 2007.

Harkening back to the military traditions of the Olympic Games, Coubertin presented the modern pentathlon as a competition between the best soldier/athletes of the various nations. This accomplished the secondary effect of stressing the historical heritage of “peace during the Games.” The event came to be dominated by military competitors, with the first civilian not capturing the gold medal until 1952. Military leaders throughout Europe embraced the warrior spirit of the modern pentathlon to such an extent that the event became a component of final examinations at all of the prominent military academies for the first half of the 20th Century. In the United States, the Army administered the trials for the modern pentathlon and did not accept civilian competitors until the 1950s. The most well known U.S. Army modern pentathlete was the nation’s lone entrant in the competition at the 1912 games, Lieutenant George S. Patton.

The Army’s First Modern Pentathlete

Training for and competing in the modern pentathlon at the 1912 Olympics left an indelible impression on Patton. He was notified of his acceptance to the Olympic team on May 10, 1912, less than two months before the competition. At this point in his preparation, Patton was “in excellent physical condition but had not run for about two years nor done any fast swimming for three.”⁵ Patton restricted himself to a raw meat and salad diet and, since much of his training time was committed to travel by steamship, he trained for the swim event in a twenty-foot canvas pool on the deck by tying a rope around his waist and swimming until his sides were chafed and raw.

At the competition, Patton had to overcome a poor shooting performance, normally his best event, which left him in 21st place. He finished a respectable 6th in the 300m swim and placed 3rd in the fencing competition, despite being the only competitor with no formal training. Each of the remaining 29 contestants had to fence against each other over the course of two days,

⁵ Carlo D’Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995) p. 131.

and Patton's aggressive style made him a favorite among the Swedish spectators.⁶ In fact, Patton handed the fencing champion, Lieutenant Mas de la Tree of France, his only loss. Patton also placed third in the steeplechase, despite having to borrow a Swedish cavalry horse. Patton's most legendary performance of the competition came during the final event, the 4000 meter cross-country run. The final event of the competition began and ended in the main stadium, with a grueling course through the hills and forests outside. Patton was the first to reenter the stadium to the cheers of the crowd, but had to walk the last 50 meters due to exhaustion. He passed out as he crossed the finish line, finishing 3rd in the race and 5th overall, and remained unconscious for several hours. Patton remembered his Olympic experience fondly, in spite of his defeat, and considered the mental and physical preparation for the modern pentathlon to be "the fitness for a perfect man-at-arms of the present day."⁷

Foundations for the Modern Pentathlete Leader

Patton's description of "a perfect man-at-arms for the present day" coincides with the CSA's vision for the pentathlete leader. In order to achieve this vision we must focus on identifying, developing, and evaluating the essential characteristics of the leader that meets this ideal. The correlation between the efforts to define today's pentathlete leader with the perceptions of Aristotle and Coubertin of the actual pentathlete lies in the pursuit of the ideal. Also, in each instance achieving the ideal is dependent on mindset. The essential characteristics of the pentathlete will, therefore, rest in the mind, just as the drive and ability to accomplish the varied pentathlon events did.

The Army's revamped leadership manual, *FM 6-22 Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile*, dated October 2006, presents an appropriate model in its chapter on Leader

⁶ Ibid, 133.

⁷ Stanley P. Hirshon, *General Patton: A Soldier's Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002) p.58.

Intelligence. The doctrine considers the components of military intelligence to be “agility, judgment, innovation, interpersonal tact, and domain knowledge”.⁸ Domain knowledge represents the required skills discussed earlier and personal tact is defined a leader’s relationship with others. This leaves agility, judgment, and innovation as the characteristics that best determine the mindset required of a pentathlete leader. By understanding and enhancing these intellectual skills, today’s leaders will develop the mental tools to operate effectively in any arena.

Mental agility, the first of these traits, is the ability of leaders at all levels to quickly adapt to and excel in changing situations. It goes beyond mere flexibility, which indicates a more passive response to one’s environment. While the current Army training program has incorporated training that develops the tactical flexibility of individual soldiers and units, through events such as AIT Urban Patrolling Lanes and Full-Spectrum Operations Exercises at the Training Centers, it does not adequately address the development of mental agility among its leaders. Leaders must have the opportunity to operate in unfamiliar environments individually in order to develop mental agility and be able to apply it as the leaders of units.

A prime opportunity to develop mental agility would be to expose those leaders to “uncomfortable” situations during periods of military education. This occurs on a limited basis now, with selected officers completing advanced degrees at civilian colleges and universities or attending sister service schools, but its practice is not wide-spread enough. In an Army War College research paper on the Congressional Fellowship Program, LTC Jimmie Keenan discusses the benefits of being exposed to unfamiliar environments, both academically and

⁸ FM 6-22 *Army Leadership: Competent, Confident, and Agile*, (Department of the Army, 2006) p. 6-1.

during the utilization tour on Capitol Hill, for participating officers.⁹ This program develops the mental agility of these officers, because it forces them to operate outside of the comfort zone of an Army or military environment. Our leaders must universally be given this opportunity at an earlier age, even if only for short durations. For example, the quickly changing event schedule, coupled with the stressors of Olympic competition, required more than physical prowess of Patton. More importantly, this experience at an early age prepared him for future responsibility. Imagine a battalion-level staff ride where individuals or small teams of officers are deposited in an unfamiliar city for 24 or 48 hours in order to accomplish a non-standard series of tasks. This is but one example of the means in which to advance and evaluate the mental agility of our future leaders.

Inherent in the ability to perform in unfamiliar territory is the judgment to make the right decisions in those situations. While most Army officers equate judgment with experience, there is an equally important element of sound judgment; extensive study. The diversity of situations on the modern battlefield limits a leader's ability to experience them all with the requisite frequency to create a body of anecdotal knowledge upon which to draw. Aggressive professional development programs, unit reading lists, and self-study are all effective means at filling this void. Patton's admiration for the classic pentathlon began with his exhaustive study of the classics. Additionally, he was well-read in contemporary military thought, cavalry, pistol, and saber tactics, politics and various other subjects. The challenge with the current operating environment, with significant forces engaged in, preparing for, or returning from support to the Global War on Terror, is that junior leaders are focused on a depth of knowledge, but are not

⁹ LTC Jimmie Keenan, "Developing the Pentathlete: The Army Congressional Fellowship Experience", US Army War College Strategic Research Project, available from <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/ksil390.pdf>, Online; accessed 19 February 2007.

contributing adequate energy to developing breadth. Academic curricula at all levels, as well as unit-level leadership, must address this shortfall in order to develop leaders with the sound judgment to take the proper action.

The final component of the pentathlete mindset is innovative thinking. Whereas mental agility and sound judgment have a collaborative relationship, innovation serves as the culmination of all of the elements of leader intelligence. It represents a leader's ability to consider an old problem in a unique way or to determine an effective solution to a completely new and unfamiliar problem. The challenge with enhancing innovation in a military environment is that it requires the fostering creativity within a system that is hierarchical and restrictive by necessity. In Patton's case, competing in the modern pentathlon provided him an opportunity to develop his innovation at the individual level. While Patton's overly aggressive fencing style was not the "school" solution, it better fit his personality and disrupted the expectations of his fellow competitors. Patton's cross-country race strategy was equally novel. He began at a dead sprint and went until he literally collapsed, claiming that "pacing was for others."¹⁰ In both instances he displayed signs of innovative thinking that would mark his later conquests.

Through his writing Patton was immediately able to transfer a portion of his innovative thinking and apply it to his military career. Throughout his career, beginning as a lieutenant, Patton published on a wide array of subjects, from an expanded discussion of his Olympic experience to a tactical analysis of the benefits of instruction of troops in the straight saber as opposed to the curved saber.¹¹ Presenting ideas in the written form is a creative avenue that remains available to junior leaders today. The number of professional journals has increased, yet

¹⁰ D'Este, p. 134.

¹¹ Published in the *Army and Navy Journal* in 1913. Hirshson, p. 62.

there are fewer instances of junior officers presenting treatises on tactics or strategy in these publications. The increased tendency towards collaborative pieces, headed by senior field grade commanders is not conducive to developing innovation in subordinate leaders, as editorial privilege is often commensurate with rank in those endeavors. Developing opportunities to enhance the opportunities for innovative thought among junior leaders will arm them with the final component towards achieving the mindset of a pentathlete leader.

Conclusion

In a recent commentary on developing pentathlete leaders, COL Gary Cheek described the current condition of leader development as a situation where the impetus for the change is coming as much from junior officers demanding transformation as it is coming from the institutional Army directing change. In his words, subordinate leaders:

will demand opportunities to develop their Pentathlete skills to be ready for “all of the events”—not just one. Like it or not, these officers will drive a transformation of our culture that will demand institutional change. It is incumbent on our institutions to respond in kind—to embrace the change in culture...¹²

The Army must respond to the request for development from junior leaders. Moreover, it must refocus the discussion of pentathlete leadership onto the mental capabilities and mindset required of future leaders and away from strictly skill development. Finally the Army must implement the systems that will develop the pentathlete leaders that meet the CSA’s vision and, more importantly, the requirements of the modern battlefield.

¹² COL Gary H. Cheek, “Preparing for the Pentathlon: Thoughts on Combined Arms Brigade Command”, *FA Journal*, NOV/DEC 2006, p. 43.

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